

Central Asian Republics and their importance in Regional Connectivity

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Abstract. This article highlights the Central Asian Republics (CARs) comprising of Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Uzbekistan- Turkmenistan, all landlocked countries , but occupying a strategic position among the Russia, China, Iran and Afghanistan. Being rich in natural resources, having diversified political system thus they are vital in present and future geo-economic scenario of One Belt One Road. Philosophically the concept of clashes and interactions among civilisations forms the theoretical framework.

Introduction .The Ontological Assumptions

Civilisations evolved around the rivers like Nile, Euphrates, Amu Darya, Yellow , Indus and Ganges. These civilisations through their evolution clashed but also interacted to promote trade and as such exchange of ideas took place. Their continuous interaction or connectivity is vital for human peace and harmony. International relations in last century were revolving around the ideological conflict between capitalism and communism, both these philosophical and theoretical paradigms took birth in 19th Century with the works and ideas of Karl Marx who in 1848 put forward the hypothesis of all history of mankind being a conflict among the working and owners class.¹ Adam Smith in his 1799 work of wealth of nations had put forward the hypothesis of having an economical system in which every individual has a right to accumulate wealth free of government interference. In 1917, Russian Revolution brought the communists and socialist in power and thus eliminating monarchy and imperialism in Russia. International relations is clearly not a subject in the ordinary sense of the word....it is not a single subject but a blend of subjects, law, history, economics, political science and geography ².

In post WWII, USA and USSR emerged as two rival camps , each striving for the elimination of other through every means including use of force, propaganda and alliances .In 1990, USSR finally collapsed and all its fifteen republics became independent including the CARs, a new paradigm thus occurred in which these five republics gained independence even without asking or struggling for. Naturally it became obvious that old system has to be replaced with the new one, ie that of capitalism has to take place irrespective of its disadvantages.³ The first decade thus witness a series of setbacks and a political and economical anarchy for these CARs. International monetary organisations , which hitherto were never allowed to work among these republics made an ingress. Western countries had a

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engles *Communist Manifesto*

² N.D.Palmer & H.C.Perkins, ed, *International Affairs, the World community in Transition*, second edition, (London; Stevens & Sons, 1957), p-XII.

³ M.G. Forsyth edited, *The theory of International Affairs selected texts from Gentilli to Traitschke* (London; George Allen, 1970), p - 18

single agenda of transforming the old socialist system into a democratic regime without taking into account the historical realities. CARs were behind the iron curtain, thus very little knowledge was available to the rest of the world about their culture and social infrastructure. The history of the region is well known to the scholars of the world but it is the post revolution era till the 1990 that was taboo and an enigma.

At the turn of millennium the 9/11 took place and all of a sudden the region became the eye of the needle, the focus shifted from democracy and economics to extremism and fighting the terror. At the same period, China emerged as a leading economical power not only in the region but also globally. Russia which had been on a decline since 1990 also got back on its feet under Vladimir Putin and same old Great game and Cold War started with a focus on the economics. USA after its intervention in Afghanistan from 2001 is still in the region and thus a political chess game is underway in which the great powers have certain objectives of denying others the advantages. USA desires the uni polar world to remain in force, china aims at not only being the regional leader but also a global power, Russia seeks its old glory and considers the region as being under its sphere of control. Iran still holds the traditional hold in the region and challenges the western civilisation on ideological basis thus it is under economical restrictions. Russia is also under western economical sanctions for its military adventures in Ukraine and Georgia. India in the east has risen economically to an extent that it exerts its influence if not globally but at least in the region, not militarily but economically. Bangladesh has become an economical miracle in last two decades. Pakistan despite its achieving a nuclear club membership in 1999 is suffering economically and has been worst hit politically and economical as a fall out of war on terror.⁴ Afghanistan since 1980 is suffering from a civil war that has devastated the nations economics and social fibre.

Connectivity; State and Region

State is defined as ‘a body of people occupying a definite territory and political organised under one government.’⁵ Connectivity, within a state refers to the harmony among the various groups, ease of movement, communication: road, rail, waterways, air. It also conveys the political freedom in which public can connect with the rulers. The freedom of business, ease in travelling abroad and vice versa. States are often grouped and referred as regions, basing upon geography, ideology, political organisations, security blocks, economics and at times merely on historical backgrounds. Connectivity, thus within states and intra and inter region depends on the economical, geography, ideology and above all on the infrastructure.

⁴ War on Terror is the term used for the campaigns launched by USA and its allies in Afghanistan, Iraq and other part of the world since 9/11. In Pakistan, the operation was initially launched as Operation Al Mizan. Also see David C. Rapoport, 2012, *The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism*, in *Terrorism Studies*, ed. John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, 41. New York: Routledge. Also see Pervaiz Musharraf *In the Line of Fire a Memoir* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2006). Bob Woodward, *Bush At War*, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2002), p.81. Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, (London, Simon & Schuster), pp.6-14.

⁵ Abdul Said, ed, *Theory of International Relations, the crisis of Relevance* (New Jersey; Prentice Hall, 1968) p-2.

Central Asia as a term, is not a reflection of geography, neither ideology rather it has a literary background.⁶ Greeks termed the area as Jaxarates (area around River Oxus), Arabs termed it as Marvaulnabar (area beyond River Amu),⁷ later Russian and British during Great game called it Turkistan (land of Turks). It was during the Russian colonisation that the area was termed as Central Asia and now the republics as mentioned above are termed as Central Asian Republics. UNESCO encompasses not only CARs but also Afghanistan, Northern Pakistan, Kashmir and Sinkiang province of China as Central Asia. Similarly, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan are termed as Sub Continent and also as South Asia. Etymologically, Middle East is not in reality middle of east but is being referred as such in literature.

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was initially raised in 1996, to settle the border dispute between the China and newly independent CARs, due to the historical legacy of frontier dispute between China and USSR. With the passage of years it has grown in stature and now have apart from CARs (less Turkmenistan) India and Pakistan as members. Therefore SCO can be termed as a region and as an entity. OBOR, One Belt One Road was put forward by the China in 2012, to enhance the connectivity of not only China with the Europe and rest of world but also of SCO. It has an immense economical, political and social impact not only for SCO but also for the entire world.

Aim. The aim of this paper is to analyse in the present scenario, the importance of CARs in enhancing the regional connectivity between SCO but also between SCO and Europe.

CARs- Geographical Pivot of Civilisations

CARs geographically occupies a central position, between the Chinese, Indus, and Persian Civilisations; thus allowing the east-west trade for last two millennium dubbed as Silk Route. It allowed the Chinese to trade with the west (Roman Empire) with caravans travelling across and through deserts and mountain passes. Halting and trading with successive caravans thus the silk and jade would be carried to the extent of Roman Empire at Syria. Similarly the Indus Civilisation also used the Leh Route to have trade with the Central Asia; thus it was this central location of Samarkand, Bukhara, Kashgar, Khajend that gave the name Central Asia to the region. Marco polo called it the Roof of the World.⁸

⁶ Jacques Houtet & Sir Leonard Woolley *History of Mankind Volume One* (NY; Harper & Row, 1962) a UNESCO project, p 451-458. Ahmad Hassan Dani *New Light on Central Asia* Lahore; Sang Meel, 1996. P36. Mawar-un-nabar means 'That which is beyond the river. Shredne Asia means Middle Asia.

⁷ S.A. Malik *The Muslim Conquest of Central Asia* (Rawalpindi; Army Education Press, 1979) also see. Jawaharlal Nehru *Glimpses of World History* (NY; John Day, 1934)

⁸ Harold John Mackinder in his 1904 article described it as Geographical Pivot of History. https://www.iwp.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/20131016_MackinderTheGeographicalJournal.pdf

⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Central-Asia> also see World Bank which describes only CARs as Central Asia. <https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/eca/central-asia/Central-Asia-brochure-Nov-2013-en.pdf>

Now, despite passage of time, not much has changed geographically, the region is still land locked, the Gobi desert , Kung Ling Mountain , Tien Shien Mountain, The Caspian Sea, Aral sea all are still as much present as they were thousands of years ago. The modern engineering technology has now enabled to cut through the mountains to build road and the most drastic invention the railways have drastically altered the distances and time and space.

Russia after the 1917 revolution gave autonomous status to the present day CARs, drew their boundaries and carried out massive upgradation of the communication infrastructure including commission of airports, roads, railways. Geographically, Caspian Sea on west acts as the boundary of CARs, Iran in south, China on east and Mongolian steppes and Russia in north are the present day borders.

Part II. Present State of Connectivity

As highlighted above, connectivity is a wide encompassing perception that includes physical, cultural and political interaction. Politically, Turkmenistan has declared neutrality since 1999 and as such is not a member of SCO. Uzbekistan has emerged as the most political active state not only by virtue of its highest number of population but also due to its historical legacy. Tajikistan is recovering from its civil war that ended in 1999, it is economically the weakest state among these. Kyrgyzstan has developed and emerged as most democratic in nature and as such boasts the better education and political awareness. Kazakhstan is the largest among all states in term of area and resources and thus have the strongest economy among all member states. Russia still maintains its political control over the states by keeping a small garrison at Tajikistan . China has invested heavily in the region and its trade has increased from mere million sin early nineties to now well over 50 Billion US \$.⁹

Railways; Linear Veins of Connectivity

Railways since their invention and commercial use from 1880s onwards in the region and in post WWII,¹⁰ acted as the main form of connectivity and trade among the CARs and it still is the most viable and effective means of economical activities. The very first railways were laid in 1879 known as trans Caspian Railways and it was extended first to Samarkand in 1888 and onwards to Tashkent in 1898.¹¹ Turk-Siberai railway line that connects present day CARs with Siberia was initiated in 1886 and was commissioned in 1930 and in 1990 was connected with China's Lanxin railways. Trans Aral railways which was commissioned in 1906 links the CARs with Russia.¹²

⁹ Saima Parveen, Syed Akhtar "China Pakistan Economic Corridor: Interdependence to Regional Integration" *Central Asia Journal* No.85, Winter 2019. [http://journals.uop.edu.pk/papers/04%20Syed%20Akhtar%20Ali%20Shah%20&%20Saima%20Parveen%20\(57-78\).](http://journals.uop.edu.pk/papers/04%20Syed%20Akhtar%20Ali%20Shah%20&%20Saima%20Parveen%20(57-78).)

¹⁰ Vitali A. Rakov. *Russian Locomotives*, 2nd ed. (Moscow,1995.)

¹¹ Jeff Sahadeo *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent* (, Indiana University Press, 2007,) p120

¹² Morrison, Alexander "Railways in Central Asia" (<http://cesmi.info/wp>

Lenin remarked that Railways are a means of capitalist system and it stands true even today. Being landlocked, CARs have no other alternate but to rely upon railways as the main means.

Limitation of CARs is, that any westward movement is limited by the Caspian Sea, thus in past and at present the railways are transported across Caspian from the Turkmenistan sea port on ferries and then again put on tracks at Baku in Armenia and thereafter the railways pass through Georgia and to Turkey. One major feature is the construction of railway tunnel at Bosphorus thus linking it with Europe.

On the northern side, the railways are linked with Volga system and onwards to Moscow but it is much more lengthy and passes through Kazakhstan, it also links the CARs with Siberia and Mongolia. A railways line has been commissioned in southern direction, linking Turkmenistan with Iran, a similar railways has been partially built linking Turkmenistan with western parts of Afghanistan. In 1992, Trans Asian Railways linking Kazakhstan with Urumqi was opened and in south, Turkmenistan linked with Iran through railways in 1996.¹³

Sub-Continent and CARs

Subcontinent comprises of three civilisation namely Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Irrawaddy; collectively it accounts for over 1.5 Billion population of the world, like CARs it has remained colonised, but under British. Historically the subcontinent was also ruled, invaded and devastated by invaders from CARs. Islam is the binding factor among the subcontinent and CARs apart from cultural links and influence. Presently, the subcontinent is a booming economy in which India and Bangladesh are in forefront with Pakistan also in the race albeit a bit slow. CARs although as a market does not offer any lucrative investment for subcontinent but it is the Russian and Chinese markets that are major goals. China can be reached through Burma and also from India but Russia can only be economically intermingled with Subcontinent through CARs. Therefore CARs are important from this aspect. Moreover, the train link is east-west in subcontinent, with heavy and dense population alongwith industrial infrastructure at Delhi, Lahore, Sialkot, Faisalabad and for these centres of manufacturing the CARs are vital to pass through to Russia.

Subcontinent lacks energy resources of oil and gas, and both are in abundance among CARs thus for the sustain economic progress CARs connectivity with Pakistan, India and Bangladesh is important.

Iran –China and CARs

¹³ Otsuka, Shigeru "Central Asian Railways and Europe-Asia Land Bridge". *Japan Railway and Transport Review*. Volume 28

In last week of March 2021, China and Iran inks a pact worth over \$400 Billion spread over 25 years under which Iran will supply oil and in return China will reciprocate with investment in infrastructure and certainly defence and nuclear fields. This is the most lucrative and expansive deal to date in the region. This brings the CARs into the limelight as Iranian oil will have to pass through the CARs to reach China, the sea route is much longer and more expensive. Iran has adopted a paradigm shift in its railways, thus focussing on its improvement to achieve the maximum benefit of its geographical location.¹⁴

China- Turkey and CARs

China westward trade with Europe relies on the passage through the CARs, there are regular freight trains running from China through the CARs onward to Turkey and through Europe to London. This is the future of land based commerce, as it links China with the Europe, no doubt, it is the Turkey which holds the key point of Dardanelles Straits but from China the train and even road convoys have to pass through CARs.¹⁵

Russia-Subcontinent & CARs

Before its breakup USSR was an ideological union but now it is more of an economical beast waiting for its awakening. Subcontinent as mentioned earlier has reached its maturity in terms of its economic potential with India leading the pack followed by Bangladesh. Both regions need each other and only plausible way is through CARs; albeit passing through Pakistan. In this connectivity it is Pakistan which holds the key as it allows the road and rail to pass through it, either leading to Russia or even China through Iran or Afghanistan. As at present and in near future the situation in Afghanistan is still unpredictable and lacks rail thus Pakistan can act as the bridge between Subcontinent and Russia through its well established rail system.

Conclusion

This paper has focussed on the importance of CARs in the regional connectivity and not on the economical potential of CARs itself which is mainly in the form of oil and gas. The TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) gas pipeline is in progress and when completed will bring the two arch rivals Pakistan and India in a more cooperative perception of carrying out more trade and reduce tension.

As is apparent, more than any other region or country it is China which is the major beneficiary of CARs, by virtue of its economic progress. China requires oil and gas and for this Iran has agreed to provide it and that has to pass through CARs. China's OBOR is also dependent upon CARs, the trade of China with west is also wholly dependent upon CARs.

¹⁴ 10th Meeting of the working group on transport and communication as part of Economic cooperation of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation held at Ankara in October 2017.

¹⁵ Manmohan Parkash *Connecting Central Asia a roadmap for regional cooperation* (Asian Development Bank, 2006).

Thus it is China which has developed the rail links and other road projects in CARs, on the other hand European Union is also showing keen interest in the development of CARs for not only trade but also to act as a check on the Chinese influence.

Subcontinent the new economic giant , requires not only energy of CARs but also an access to the Russian massive market and that is only viable through CARs; similarly Russia also seeks South Asian markets and that again relies upon CARs.

International North –South transport corridor (INSTC) whose founding members are Russia-India and Iran with Oman, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Turkey, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Syria , East Coast Corridor of Caspian Sea (Iran-Turkmenistan – Kazakhstan). Asghabat Agreement Consortium , having Oman, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Pakistan. The KTAI+China (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan ,Iran +China) are some of the major connectivity organisations, pacts , agreements that intends fostering regional connectivity. The INSTC will allow India to reduce cost upto 166 US \$ per ton in transporting goods from Mumbai to Europe , as compare to the existing sea route.¹⁶

End Statement

More than mere economics, it is the inter civilisation connectivity among people and cultures, the salvation of humankind depends upon the good connectivity among the races, the perception of hate created by the states and religions has destroyed millions of human lives and only through having more access to travel, more interaction, more exchange of ideas among the west-east, north-south, we can collectively build a better and more peaceful world for next generation and all this is viable when we have connectivity. CARs by virtue of its geographical location are vital for this connectivity between Subcontinent –Russia, between Europe and China.

¹⁶ Ministry of Finance , Government of India, also see Feller, Gordon "Trade route of the future? India, Iran and Russia are pushing a North–South Transportation Corridor to reach Northern Europe". *The Journal of Commerce. Presidents open Kazakhstan to Turkmenistan rail link* (<http://www.railwaygazette.com/news/projects-infrastructure/single-view/view/presidents-open-kazakhstan-to-turkmenistan-rail-link.html>)
l). *Railway Gazette International*.